Harmonics

A harmonic pertains to a series of oscillations in which each oscillation has a frequency that is an integral multiple of the same basic frequency. Wow, that sounds confusing... Okay, what does that mean to us guitar players? Basically, when we pluck a guitar string it vibrates in a very specific and symmetrical way. If we touch a vibrating string lightly at these specific, symmetrical places we get a pleasant sounding chime (harmonic) from the instrument that we would not normally get. Still sound confusing?

The 5th, 7th and 12th frets are the most prevalent places to sound a harmonic. For a harmonic to be played, the string must vibrate. The more intense (loudly) a string is vibrating, the better chance you will have producing a harmonic. 12th fret harmonics seemed to be the easiest to produce. That is, they are loudest. After that, frets 5 and 7 are the next loudest. Practice makes perfect. Do it over and over again until it sounds right.

Standard technique- this is the most common technique used in the easiest to understand and execute. For this technique we will be picking the string with our picking hand while grabbing the harmonic with our fretting hand.

1. For this example, precisely place your fingertip directly on the string, directly over the fret wire of fret 12, on the low E string. This is very important. Many people will sloppily put their fingertip somewhere around the targeted fret. You don't want to be one of those people, right? ☺ Laziness here will make your harmonics boring and quiet. Now, once you are directly over the fret AND touching the string, pluck the string firmly. Can you hear the chime? Great! If so, move on. If not, the two most common mistakes are that you are actually playing the fret as if I wanted you to play an actual note on fret 12, or your finger is not touching the string at all and you are plucking the open E string.
2. After you have plucked the harmonic, lift your finger right away. This step is not totally necessary, however it is helpful. Leaving your finger on the string will dampen it and cause the chime(harmonic) to fade out quicker.

Now, for practice keep trying the 12th fret of the low 6th string. Once you get the hang of that, try working with strings five through one. Notice that the thinner strings are harder to successfully get a loud harmonic out of, while the thicker strings are easier. This is a fairly universal concept. Once you get the 12th fret harmonics, use the same exact techniques on frets five and seven. Work with the thicker strings first. Once you master those moved to the thinner strings. Once you start getting the hang of it, try to use some of your other fingers so that you can build speed and agility. As another exercise, see if you can come up with some melodies. Notice the note names on the accompanying harmonics diagram. You won't find a harmonic for every note using this method, so some melodies are not possible using this technique. You can also play harmonics 5, 7 or 12 frets above anything that you are fretting making ANY melody combination possible.